

Ruby Bridges, Cultural Materialism and Prayer as a Material Object

In 1960, six-year old Ruby Bridges was the first African American girl to integrate a white Southern elementary school in the state of Louisiana. On November 14, escorted by four US Marshalls, Ruby walked through the doors of William Frantz Elementary, Louisiana. As she walked, she was confronted by an angry mob of white protestors and segregationists who yelled profanities and threw objects (Boyd, 2013), yet Ruby persisted, and in so doing, Ruby came to mark a pivotal point in US history.

Ruby found herself as the target of racial violence and hatred due to a confluence of factors that began with the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, (347 U.S. 483,1954) that ruled 'separate-but-equal' schools were unconstitutional. Although the law required integrated schools, many white people strongly opposed the Court's ruling and they continued to block changes in the school. Ruby, who had recently relocated from Mississippi to Louisiana with her parents, was enrolled in an all-white school that was demographically closer to her home. In 1960, with the encouragement from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who fought for racial equality, Ruby's parents agreed to have her sent to this school.

Robert Coles, a Harvard professor and psychiatrist volunteered to provide counseling for Ruby and her family. As an enthralled witness to the daily terror Ruby experienced as she attempted to walk to school, Coles relocated to Louisiana to volunteer free counselling services for Ruby and her family. Thirty years later, Robert Coles wrote a children's book depicting Ruby's plight, detailing pertinent aspects of the events. One important feature, and the premise of this paper, is Coles' (1995) appreciation of Ruby's stoic demeanor during such a horrific time in her young life, Cole (1995) posits her resilience to be as a result of her consistent prayer life. In this paper, I examine the material object of prayer and, through a cultural materialistic lens, I explore the physical manifestation of prayer, its connection to Ruby's resilience, and its significance within African American culture and education.